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PP RUEHCN RUEHDT RUEHHM
DE RUEHCHI #0138/01 2720951
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P R 290951Z SEP 09
FM AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1160
INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHINGTON DC
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 1244

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CHIANG MAI 000138

SIPDIS

NSC FOR WALTON

E.O. 12958: DECL: 9/29/2019
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [KDEM](#) [PROP](#) [TH](#)
SUBJECT: RED-SHIRTS, YELLOW-SHIRTS BEGIN DIALOGUE

REF: A. CHIANG MAI 132 (DOWNPLAY RECONCILIATION CALL)
[¶](#)B. CHIANG MAI 93 (U.S. ACADEMIC DISCUSSES)
[¶](#)C. 08 CHIANG MAI 178 (PRO AND ANTI-THAKSIN)
[¶](#)D. CHIANG MAI 59 (COMMUNITY RADIO STATIONS)
[¶](#)E. CHIANG MAI 32 (REDS SPOIL TWO)
[¶](#)F. CHIANG MAI 24 (BY-ELECTIONS, REDS AND MIGRANTS)
[¶](#)G. CHIANG MAI 18 (TOUGHER TIMES AHEAD)
[¶](#)H. CHIANG MAI 3 (RED-SHIRTS FLEX)
[¶](#)I. 08 CHIANG MAI 168 (POLITICAL TEMPERATURE)

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CLASSIFIED BY: Alex Barrasso, Chief, Pol/Econ, CG Chiang Mai.
REASON: 1.4 (d)

Summary and Comment

[¶](#)1. (C) Spurred on by a U.S. speaker program that focused on the role of opposition political parties and non-party actors (Ref B), members of red-shirt and yellow-shirt groups in Chiang Mai held an initial meeting on September 23 to iron out some differences and search for common ground. Though they stressed the need to keep the dialogue low-profile for fear of a backlash from more extremist elements on both sides of the spectrum, participants agreed to meet again and to expand the circle to include private sector representatives and respected academics, with the goal of preventing local politics from further harming Chiang Mai's economy.

[¶](#)2. (C) Comment: We are gratified that participants on both sides cited the Mission-sponsored speaker program (Ref B) as empowering them to realize that they should and could find common ground for Chiang Mai's benefit. Though their meeting is a positive first step, much work remains to be done. Extremist elements in both camps have personalized their political differences, and have personal interests that stand to be harmed if true political reconciliation takes hold. We will nonetheless continue to impress upon actors on both sides that divergent views and the ability to express them, when done peacefully, is a large part of what makes democracies vibrant and flourishing, and to encourage their nascent reconciliatory efforts. End Summary and Comment.

¶3. (C) Differences in the political views of anti-government red-shirts and anti-Thaksin yellow-shirts have played out on Thailand's streets several times in recent years, most notably during the anti-Thaksin People's Alliance for Democracy's (PAD) 2008 seizure of Government House and Bangkok's airports, and the red-shirt riots in Bangkok and Pattaya earlier this year. In Chiang Mai, tensions have run particularly high, with the most egregious violence taking place in November 2008, when a mob of red-shirts took the father of the local pro-PAD community radio station out of his car and subsequently killed him (see Refs E-I for more on the dynamics between the red-shirt and yellow-shirt groups in Chiang Mai). It wasn't until June 2009 that actors on both sides in Chiang Mai had a serious political discussion with each other. That exchange of views took place as part of a Mission-sponsored State Department Speaker Program featuring University of California-Davis professor Larry Berman, who spoke at various locales in Thailand last June on the role of opposition parties and non-party actors in a democracy (Ref B). When Dr. Berman visited Chiang Mai, the Consulate brought together a group of red-shirt and yellow-shirt leaders who, after Berman's remarks, engaged with him in a discussion of the institutional parameters critical to a functioning democracy. The participants later praised Dr. Berman's program, noting it had convinced them that they could and should work together to find common ground on social, economic and political issues.

Who Was At the Table?

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¶4. (C) This event was the catalyst for a September 23 meeting in Chiang Mai, at which representatives of the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) and Campaign for Popular Democracy (CPD) on the yellow-shirt side, and the Northern Grassroots Confederation (NGC) on the red-shirt side, met for two and a half hours to discuss their differences and search for common ground. According to a neutral participant who served as moderator for the meeting, the discussions were amicable, constructive and open-minded.

¶5. (C) Representing the yellow-shirts were CPD Acting Secretary-General Suriyan Tongnu-ied and PAD Chiang Mai Coordinator Phongphan Kongkham. The red-shirt groups were represented by NGC Chairman Phromsak Saengpho, who also speaks for red-shirt community radio 89.5 FM, as well as Somchat Malaihuan (editor of "Red Front" magazine and spokesman for red-shirt radio 105.5 FM) and former Chiang Mai University professor Chiraporn Chankham. The CPD's Suriyan claims to have close links to the PAD's Phiphop Thongchai (Ref C), while we see the NGC's Phromsak as very close to banned Thai Rak Thai politician Chaturon Chaisang. Phromsak and his red-shirt group, though they do not advocate violence, believe that the elites and monarchy need to be overthrown, and subscribe to traditional Communist ideology.

What Was On It?

¶ 16. (C) The NGC's Phromsak admitted that the national red-shirt movement was largely "disoriented, lacking an agenda, and fraught with violence." The movement served politicians' interests, he added, not those of the people. Achievement of its political goals via violence was not a victory for the Thai people, and was also not sustainable, he opined. Phromsak characterized national red-shirt leaders Veera Musikapong, Jatuporn Prompan and Nattawut Saikua as representatives of the opposition Phuea Thai Party, not the people. Phromsak made similarly derogatory statements about the leader of the local Rak Chiang Mai 51 (RCM51) red-shirt group - Phetcharawat Wattanapongsirikul - saying that he was more interested in money-making than benefiting the masses. RCM51 relies only on money from Thaksin, Phromsak noted, adding that the politicians know how to take advantage of the people's loyalty to him.

¶ 17. (C) For his part, the yellow-shirt CPD's Suriyan focused his initial comments on what he called Thailand's evolving center of power . The main issue at hand was the question of succession of "the most revered institution" (an overt reference to the King). Focus on those individuals at the center of the succession issue threatened to sideline both the red-shirts and yellow-shirts, he opined. The "blue-shirts" (associated with former Thaksin ally and current government coalition partner Newin Chidchob) were also a concern, Suriyan speculated, as they could target both the yellow and red-shirts in an effort to assert themselves as the predominant force in Thai politics.

¶ 18. (C) "Red Front" magazine's Somchat opined that the two sides shared common ground in that they both wanted "new" politics and to see the Thai State recreated, with the goal of realizing true democracy. Somchat noted that one area both sides agreed on was that land-grabbing by foreign capitalists at the expense of farmers had to be stopped. Somchat and yellow-shirt Suriyan also both agreed on the need to curtail the influence of politicians, and strengthen local people's participation in politics.

¶ 19. (C) Both groups agreed on two principles moving forward: they must be free to peacefully express their political views without fear of intimidation/harassment from the other; and they should seek common ground around which they could hold joint activities and bring outsiders into the fold. Furthermore, they agreed that the successful organization of a particular activity by one group did not necessarily mean a defeat for the other. Rather, it highlighted the need to respect each other's rights

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and freedoms.

¶ 10. (C) Participants discussed two concrete areas in which they could immediately begin working together to reduce tension - the media and local economy. With regard to the media, they agreed on the need to counter "misinformation" spread by the red-shirt RCM51 radio station and its pro-PAD counterpart (Refs C-D). Somchat and Phromsak noted that a total of five red-shirt stations could join this effort, hopefully marginalizing RCM51. More importantly, print publications associated with these five stations would also follow suit and try to counteract false propaganda. Both sides agreed that the next step would be to counter misinformation in the general public, and that these measures would be more effective than strengthened law enforcement measures undertaken by Provincial authorities.

¶11. (C) Regarding Chiang Mai's economy, participants agreed to explore holding a public forum to discuss problems facing the urban middle class, and to include private sector representatives in the discussion. Their goal is to reestablish Chiang Mai's image as a thriving, peaceful area, rather than an "unruly" one. They expressed interest in having representatives from hotel and tourism associations participate in the forum.

What's Next?

¶12. (C) Both sides agreed to meet again to discuss the proposed program of work in greater detail, and to expand the dialogue to include selected business community representatives. Chiang Mai's Chamber of Commerce and Federation of Thai Industries were mentioned as possible partners. (Per Ref A, these groups had joined local academics and hotel/tourism groups to issue a public statement calling for reconciliation between Chiang Mai's yellow-shirts and red-shirts). Participants also stressed the need to keep the dialogue low-profile for now, fearing that publicizing it could lead to a backlash from more extremist elements on both sides.

Provincial Government, Private Sector React

¶13. (C) Chiang Mai's Vice Governor for Security Affairs told Pol/Econ Chief on September 25 that he expected things between red-shirts and yellow-shirts to calm down. He sung the praises of strengthened law enforcement, noting that in the wake of the agreement he struck with community radio stations in May (Ref D), their rhetoric had toned down significantly. On September 24, the head of the local chapter of the Federation of Thai Industries told P/E Chief that he too expected both groups would step back from confrontation. (Note: it's unclear whether either contact was aware of the September 23 red-shirt/yellow-shirt meeting).

¶14. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Bangkok.
MORROW